

# Mechanisms of Control in Local Trade Unions<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE PROBLEM of control in social systems has attracted much well-deserved attention. The control process is a universal and essential aspect of organized behaviour. Attempts to understand this process fall generally into three related categories: (a) speculative and theoretical discussions designed to probe into the conceptual meaning of control, and how this meaning ties in to larger bodies of social theory; <sup>2</sup> (b) empirical and experimental research designed to investigate some of the determinants and implications of varying patterns of control; <sup>3</sup> and (c) descriptive research designed to portray the situation with regard to control as it may exist in a social system.<sup>4</sup>

Ideally, these approaches are highly related. What is learned through one should contribute to our understanding of the others. The present article is based on a larger research project regarding trade unions which has been partly concerned with each of the above broad questions. We shall discuss here data which are designed to describe aspects of the control process in local trade unions, and to illustrate some of the means through which the members may exercise control in their unions.

Four local unions in Michigan, United States, have been studied. All are of the industrial type, varying in size from 350 to 850 members. None of the officers is employed by the unions on a paid basis. Two types of data

<sup>1</sup> The material presented here is partly adapted from a larger report written by the present author in collaboration with Robert L. Kahn. This study is one of a continuing series of researches in organizational functioning conducted by the staff of the Human Relations Program of the Survey Research Center. It was supported by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. I would like to thank Irwin Goffman and Robert Kahn for their helpful discussions in the development of the material presented here. Marjorie N. Donald and Basil Georgopoulos have made useful suggestions with regard to the write-up.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Bertrand Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1946.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Arnold S. Tannenbaum, "Control Structure and Union Functions", *Amer. J. Sociol.*, 61, 6 May, 1956, pp. 536-45.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Arnold S. Tannenbaum and Robert L. Kahn, "Control Structure in Organizations; A General Descriptive Technique as Applied to Four Local Unions", *Human Relations* (in press).

are to be presented: responses to a number of questions asked in a paper and pencil questionnaire, and illustrative quotations from interviews conducted with a small number of members. Although the locals differ in their level of membership participation, and in certain aspects of their control structure, the tabular data presented below are derived through averaging the results for the four locals.<sup>1</sup> These data are based on a representative sample of members and officers in each local. The total N is about 700. While the data from these locals may not be typical of American unions, they nevertheless illustrate some of the mechanisms through which union members might exercise control.

Control in a union, as in any organization, may be exerted through several categories or phases of activity.<sup>2</sup> One of these is the *legislative* or decision-making phase, which involves the process of deciding upon the rules, policies, and general actions of the organization. Another is the *administrative* phase which involves the day-to-day interpretation, expediting, and carrying out of legislative decisions. There is also the *sanctions* phase, which entails the meting out or withholding of rewards and punishments in the process of enforcing rules and standards.

Although each of these phases of control may occur either formally or informally, legislative control occurs largely at meetings or through other formally defined union structures. Administrative and sanctions control, however, frequently occur outside meetings and may be oriented relative to either formal or informal union standards. For example, informal sanctions may be instituted against a member who fails to play a formal role such as helping out during a strike or attending a union meeting.

The relationship among these phases of control is often complex; the same persons need not be involved equally in all three. As in government, some persons may be primarily charged with the responsibility of legislating, others with administering, and still others with the sanctions process. In large organizations specialization among these phases of control is necessary while in smaller organizations it is possible for the same persons to be involved in all three. An interesting and not uncommon arrangement involves "administrators" administering law over "legislators" who originally made it. The former exercise a degree of control over the latter, but this control is within a framework initially formulated by the latter. This process is illustrated experimentally by the Merei research with children in which a dominant, leader-type child is placed in an ongoing group which has an established set of traditions, customs, and rules. In some cases, this "leader" may continue to play a leadership role by ordering the other children to do *precisely those things which they were already doing* and which were a part of the rules evolved

<sup>1</sup> The reader is referred to two articles which discuss differences in control structure among these locals: A. S. Tannenbaum, *op.cit.*, and A. S. Tannenbaum and R. L. Kahn, *op. cit.* The averaging here is justified on the grounds that the differences among the locals do not affect the types of comparisons to be made below.

<sup>2</sup> N. C. Morse, E. Reimer, and A. S. Tannenbaum, "Regulation and Control in Hierarchical Organizations", *J. soc. Issues*, VII, 3, 1951, pp. 41-8.

prior to his entry into the group.<sup>1</sup> He becomes an administrator of law over those who made the law.

In certain respects this arrangement is characteristic of the large, democratic organization. General law and organizational policy are decided by a broad segment of the membership while the administrative function and the authority to initiate formal sanctions are delegated to a few. The administrative and order-giving power of the leaders is relatively narrow and specific and is subsumed under general legislative decisions made elsewhere. Furthermore, the "leaders" may be chosen by the "followers". To the extent that this is true of certain local unions, the task of evaluating who controls whom becomes complicated by the task of understanding who controls control.

The issue of control in unions is further complicated by the fact that control is exercised with regard to many issues which vary in their importance to the membership. A few outstanding areas of decision-making, for example, include whether or not certain money expenditures are to be made, what the union will ask in its bargaining with management, or whether or not the union will go out on strike. Decisions with regard to these issues are made only infrequently but they are of the utmost importance to most members. On the other hand, there is a large body of decisions which are made almost daily and which are of little concern to most members: how a particular grievance should be handled, who should be appointed to this or that *ad hoc* committee, which member is to be sent to a national training conference. Obviously these issues arouse differential interest. By and large the members are not concerned with the minute details of the ongoing organization although their interest may reach fever pitch when it comes to deciding about bargaining demands or going out on strike.

Union members view the control processes of their organization in predominantly pragmatic terms; they view control in terms of issues that are important to them. It is therefore necessary to make the distinction between decisions which are crucial to the members and those which are of less importance. One worker who felt that the rank and file had a high level of control in his local put it this way:

"Speaking frankly, most issues are cut and dried before you get there [to meetings]—that is except the important ones."

Table I illustrates the differences in involvement which members indicate relative to three important areas of decision making: going out on strike, bargaining demands, and money expenditures. These data are based on the following questions: "Who do you think has the most to say in deciding whether or not the union will go out on strike over an issue?", "Who do you think has most to say about what kinds of things the union will ask for in negotiations?", and "Who do you think has the most to say in deciding whether or not the union will spend money out of its treasury?" The

<sup>1</sup> Ferenc Merei, "Group Leadership and Institutionalization", in *Readings in Social Psychology*, Guy E. Swanson, T. M. Newcomb, and Eugene L. Hartley, eds., New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1952, pp. 318-28.

TABLE I

PROPORTION OF MEMBERS WHO INDICATE THAT THE MEMBERSHIP OR OTHER GROUPS IN THE LOCAL HAVE THE MOST SAY IN DECIDING STRIKE ACTION, BARGAINING DEMANDS, AND MONEY EXPENDITURES

	<i>Proportion of Members who indicate :</i>					<i>Total per cent</i>
	<i>Membership as a whole has most say</i>	<i>Active members have most say</i>	<i>Bargaining committee has most say</i>	<i>Executive Board has most say</i>	<i>Others* have most say</i>	
In deciding strike action . . . .	72	14	5	2	7	100
In deciding money expenditures . . . .	46	29	5	17	3	100
In deciding bargaining demands . . . .	40	23	18	6	13	100

\* Stewards and committeemen, the president, and the international field representative.

possible alternatives which were provided in response to these questions are indicated in Table I.

On the issue of strike action, 72 per cent of the members agree that the membership as a whole has the most say. On the other hand, less than a majority consider the membership to have the most say in deciding money expenditures or bargaining demands. What is true of the rank and file very likely applies to other groups within the local. Officer groups may have different amounts of influence relative to different issues. The bargaining committee probably exerts more influence over negotiation demands than it does over money expenditures. The executive board may (in some locals) have a greater say in the area of money expenditures than it does with regard to the question of strike action.

Informal sanctions instituted by the members likewise appear to follow a gradient with regard to different issues. This is illustrated by data in response to the following questions: "If someone in this local did not attend a local meeting, would you let him know that he should have?", "If you found out that someone in this local had not voted in a union election, would you let him know that he should have?", and "If this local was having a strike and someone did not help out, would you let him know that he should have?" Table II (overleaf) presents the responses to these questions as averaged for the four locals.

Sanctions are more likely to be instituted by the members against those who fail to help out during a strike than against those who fail to attend a union meeting. The members express much interest in and exercise a great deal of sanctions control relative to the former issue; it is an issue which has an important bearing on the welfare of the average member. On the other hand they exercise relatively little sanctions control in connection with regular

TABLE II  
LIKELIHOOD OF SANCTIONS BY MEMBERS

Activity	Likelihood member would tell another that he should have taken part in activity :					Total per cent
	Would certainly let him know	Would probably let him know	Might let him know	Would probably not let him know	Would not let him know	
Helping out on strike . . .	57	17	15	5	6	100
Voting in union election . . .	46	22	15	7	10	100
Attending a union meeting . . .	26	22	22	13	17	100

union meetings. These meetings, generally concerned with the minutiae of running the union, interest the members but little, and their control over attendance is correspondingly less.

Member participation in union meetings is often considered a criterion of union democracy. However, there is a growing realization that attendance at union meetings is but one means through which the members might exercise some influence in their union. The rank and file has recourse to devices of control in addition to those exercised at regular meetings. Among these are informal and representational mechanisms of control,<sup>1</sup> and election and recall power over leaders. They may also have a broad potentiality of control where they may not actively and explicitly exercise it, but this too has important implications for the way in which the union is run and serves as an indirect form of control which the members implicitly exercise. This should not be construed as attempting to negate the importance of the union meeting as *one* channel through which control may be exercised. The union meeting is an obvious *locus* of decision making. Many of the members who attend do so largely because they want to have a say in what the union is doing. Especially by attendance at *special* meetings, members exercise control when important issues are at stake. Generally speaking, it might be expected that the level of membership control will be partly reflected in the level of meeting attendance. This will be true not only because the meeting is one possible channel for decision-making, but also because attendance is likely to reflect a general level of interest and activity on the part of the membership in the various affairs, formal and informal, decision making and non-decision-making, of the local. Thus we find that among the four locals studied there is a relationship between amount of formal participation and the level of control exercised by the members in the affairs of the union.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Joseph Kovner and Herbert J. Lahne, for a detailed discussion of this point. "Shop Society and the Union", *Ind. & Lab. Rel. Rev.*, Vol. 7, 1, October, 1953, pp. 3-14.

Direct attendance at meetings, however, is not an absolute requisite to control. The member does not have to be physically present at a meeting for his voice to be heard. One vehicle for the informal decision-making process is the discussion which takes place outside the meeting hall:

"It's always talked around all over. It's talked around the shop and down at the meeting."

Members may influence the course of any prospective decision by what they say at these informal sessions. Furthermore, many members can rely on others to represent them at the meetings. One worker felt:

"There are a couple of stewards that I can depend on pretty well. They speak for me very often. That's what they're stewards for."

Or:

"The steward is supposed to—that's his job. The steward has done this for me occasionally—once or twice a year. It depends on how you feel. You have to represent yourself on some things."

Or as one active member put it:

"Usually if I'm not at a meeting and I know that some points should be brought up, I usually tell a committeeman to bring it up."

In addition to representation along organizational lines (through the steward or officers) informal representation may occur among groups of friends:

"Sometimes we get together and talk it over before. We elect someone to speak for us. We can't all do it."

Even though many members fail to attend meetings, and many abstain from this process of informal representation, they may nevertheless exercise a degree of control in more subtle ways. Their mere membership in the local makes a difference and their presence must be taken into account by the decision-makers. These members may remain inert only so long as matters go their way or do not get too seriously out of hand. The decision-makers know this and guide their actions accordingly. They cannot persist in decisions which contravene the interests of this quiescent element without arousing it to action. Members who feel this way frequently explain their failure to attend meetings on the grounds that "Things will be decided the way I like them anyway." Why should such a member exert himself when he gets what he wants without effort? But let an important decision arise which he fears will "go the wrong way," and he may try to have a more direct effect on its course. We have here a latent force which has an important bearing on the manifest actions of the local; it represents what we have called the potentiality of control.

Closely related is the power of ratification. Legislative or decision-making control can be seen as consisting of at least two kinds of behaviour. One is the process of initiating and influencing the passage of legislative decisions. The other involves the function of ratifying, or legitimizing these decisions. Legislative control thus includes two aspects—one relatively prolonged and the other relatively simple and concise. The prolonged aspect involves the

political and psychological interplay of forces—argument, compromise, exercise of influence, persuasion. The second aspect involves a simple yes-or-no decision. Will or will not the union be committed to a particular policy ; will it or will it not follow a given course of action ? The former is a long and complex process. The latter is relatively short and simple. This distinction is especially important in labour unions, where relatively few members take the initiative in raising legislative issues, and few have the time or ability to “sell” their point of view. Ratification control while highly important requires relatively little effort. It is in this way that a large segment of the membership may step in to accept or reject the effort of others. Thus, members see the “Body” as being subject to the persuasion of various persons. “Men who are good talkers and good salesmen,” for example, may have considerably more influence at union meetings. “They get across their point.” But it is clear that many in these locals see the Body as ratifying all important decisions. “Officers have a lot to say—but it’s still up to the Body.” An issue may be settled only after long and arduous effort on the part of interested parties but if it is an important issue the Body makes the final decision :

“If they vote it in, it’s in—if they vote it out, it’s out.” While members recognize the influence of leaders, they tend to stress their own power of ratification. When asked about going out on strike, for example, one member said :

“The officials have more say. They call the strike meetings in the first place. The Body decides though.”

One further aspect of membership control is made apparent in talking to union members. We have touched before on the sensitivity of union leaders to the desires of a relatively inert membership. One important determinant of this sensitivity is the fact that the leaders are elected and depend upon the support of the rank and file for their continuance in office. Even inactive members may carefully watch what their officers do and stand ready to remove them at the time of election. A much higher proportion of members vote in union elections than regularly attend meetings. One worker when asked whether or not it were possible for the president and executive board to have *all* of the say in deciding things in the local, put it this way :

“No, you wouldn’t have a union then, you’d have a dictator board. All have a vote when it comes down to brass tacks. *It wouldn’t last long because the people would rise up against them.* These things should be done open and above board. The laws of the land are made that way, why not this ?”

Another member who saw the officers as a powerful group in the local had this to say in response to the same question :

“It would be possible. They could do it by rigging meetings through parliamentary tactics. They probably have. *They couldn’t get away with it often—there’d be a recall vote.*”

Although the members may not be highly involved in the day-to-day decisions of the local, they appear to have a measure of control over those who are.

## SUMMARY

Control in a local union is a complex process. It is exercised through various phases of activity: legislative, administrative, and sanctions; and relative to many issues which differ in their importance to the membership. Different persons may be differentially involved in the various phases of control. Furthermore, the members often view control of their union in pragmatic terms, in terms of those issues which make a difference to them.

The above descriptions help explain what members mean by control, and how membership control may be maintained at a fairly high level without a corresponding involvement of the rank and file in the regular formal meetings of the union. Members exercise control through meetings, but also through other channels. Informal discussions and representational arrangements, ratification power and the power of election and recall, all represent possible mechanisms of control at the disposal of the membership.

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